Pro Rege

Volume 23 | Number 1 Article 5

September 1994

Vision With a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship (Book Review)

John Van Dyk
Dordt College

civil authorities into sovereignty of the people. Despite Calvin's own opposition to revolution, these successors developed Calvinist principles into a revolutionary ideology.

Though only a minor key of the work, Kelly suggests how these successors "surpassed" Calvin. Beza and the Huguenot tractarians against French absolutism borrowed from Roman and scholastic legal theory to move from Calvin's view of God-ordained authority toward a secularized constitutionalism based on "natural rights," such as that government requires the consent of the people and that its purpose is to protect the people's liberty and safety. Knox also claimed the fundamental authority of the people, but did so on the basis of the Old Testament covenant between God and the people of Israel. According to Kelly, Knox's constitutionalism was more "Hebraic" than Calvin's, for Knox attempted to apply the Old Testament civil law directly in the life of the new, millenial covenantal people of Scotland (56). One might add that, contrary to Kelly's use of Perry Miller's classic portrayal of the colonial Puritans as undertaking a new "forward-looking" mission, recent work has shown the Puritans also to have understood themselves as a reconstitution of the primal Old Testament covenant. Thus, we see that Calvin's successors departed from his view of the integral relationship between divine law and history, and between Scriptural and natural revelation, toward a scholastic Calvinism which distanced Scriptural and natural revelation, divine law and history, church and state, mercy and justice. Kelly's own description of Calvinism as a "balance between nature and grace" (107) itself reflects this scholastic reinterpretation of Calvin.

In the end, Kelly's claim that a careful reading of the Declaration of Independence reveals its Calvinist roots is true only in the most vague sense. Kelly makes his claim by minimizing both the important departures from Calvin's ideas and the extensive current scholarship on the Great Awakening and American Revolutionary thought. In the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, as well as the Presbyterian evangelical Jonathon Witherspoon, Calvin's view of the integration of Scriptural and natural revelation, and of divine law and history, was abandoned in favour of an exclusively "natural" moral philosophy. Though evident already in the Huguenot tractarians and in later Presbyterians like Buchanan and Althusius, the legacy of scholastic revision to Calvinism was demonstrated especially in the American Declaration of Independence. Its claim to the right of resistance based on "natural rights" highlights the acquiescence of Calvinists to the confinement of "religion" to the Bible and the church and the ascendency of secularized constitutional theory based on "natural rights."

Kelly's claim that the American constitution was the finest fruit of Calvinist legal theory is therefore tenuous at best. Though a welcome reminder of the promise of Calvinist political theory, Kelly's book has set out to justify the American arrangement of religious liberty through the separation of church and state as a good in itself. In doing so he unfortunately has narrowed the scope of Calvin's claims. Moreover, Calvin, as well as Beza, Knox, and many other Calvinists, were both "backward" and "forward-looking" in working out their theories. Kelly's use of these terms serves to select and affirm those elements which became predominant especially in America—a form of analysis which Herbert Butterfield aptly described as history written by the winners.

A Vision With a Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship, Gloria Goris Stronks and Doug Blomberg, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993). 326 pages, paperback, $19.95. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Education.

I have two overriding concerns about this book. The first is that it may not be read by as many people as it should be. The second is that those who do read it may not take it as seriously as they should. Why these concerns?

For one thing, *A Vision With a Task* is a sizable volume—more than 300 pages. Will principals, teachers, school board members, and interested parents find the time to read it? And not only read it, but reflect on it, discuss it, and act on it?

My second concern requires more discussion. Why would those who read the book not take it seriously? Here is the reason: the book presents a vision and a task so big that many readers will smile and say: "That's all very nice, but we live in the real world. My school isn't ready for this sort of thing until a lot of other things are changed, and I don't see a lot of other things changing very fast!"

A reaction of this sort reflects, of course, skeptical pragmatism. Such pragmatism judges practicality without first considering foundational issues. To be sure, questions of strategy, possibility, and practice are very important. But they can never be the first, the fundamental questions. *A Vision With a Task* has it right: we begin with the vision, and then move on to look at practical matters. If our vision is not clear,

we shall soon be mired in a morass of pragmatism. My review, then, will not begin by asking whether or not the book presents a workable program. Rather, I will focus on a prior question: does the book urge us to follow biblical vision for education, or does it merely Christianize stale progressivist and social reconstructionist views?

Background and content: *A Vision With a Task* is the result of a full year of research and reflection sponsored by the Calvin College Center for Christian Scholarship. Six competent educators contributed to the volume. Editors Gloria Goris Stronks of Calvin College and Doug Blomberg, Principal of the Institute for Christian Education in Australia, shaped the final version into a coherent, well-written product. The book is not simply the result of in-house ivory-tower conversations. On the contrary, as the editors explain in the preface, the research procedures involved numerous teachers, principals, and Christian schools.

What is the purpose of this book? The authors certainly do not call for radically transforming our Christian school system. Instead, they offer a modest proposal. "It is our hope," they say, "that readers will discuss the book, challenge each other with the ideas, and come to a deeper understanding of how to make their own school the kind of school God wants it to be"(12). Hardly the language of revolutionaries!

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, consisting of two chapters, "affirms the vision." Part II, titled "realizing the vision," comprises nine chapters in all. The two chapters of Part III "take up the task." The distinction between Parts II and III is not immediately clear: "taking up the task" seems to be the same thing as "realizing the vision."

One interesting feature of the book is the large number of vignettes or case studies interspersed throughout the text. These make the book even more readable. Of course, one can criticize the vignettes for being too stylized and too unrealistic, and sometimes it looks as if the contributors are merely putting their own words in the mouths of fictitious characters. Another useful feature is the list of discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Many of these questions will trigger lively and fruitful debate.

What vision? The authors summarize as follows: "In the Christian school the roles of conserver, discerner, and reformer—practiced institutionally and individually—come together in a full-orbed life of responsive discipleship, characterized by unwrapping God's gifts, sharing each other's burdens, and working for shalom"(18). This formulation neatly interrelates a number of biblical concepts. First, the conserving, discerning and reforming formula reflects the cultural mandate—dress and keep the garden—as well as New Testament injunctions to discern the spirits of our age. Secondly, the reference to institutional and individual educational practice reminds us that we are individual image-bearers linked together in community. Finally, unwrapping gifts, sharing burdens, and working for shalom represent major motifs in the epistles of Paul. Perhaps the authors could have added another one of Paul's favorite themes, viz., celebrating each other's joys in mutual encouragement. In any case, the key concept binding these various components together is "responsive disciple-ship." "Responsive discipleship" summarizes the vision set forth in the book.

Why "responsive" instead of "responsible" discipleship? What is the difference between "responsiveness" and "responsibility"? After all, various earlier publications, such as *Educating for Responsible Action* (Nicholas Wolterstorff) and *Educating for Responsible Service* (Joan Stob) have trained our ears to accept the adjective "responsible" as an accurate descriptor. Towards the end of Chapter 1 the authors explain what they mean: "[D]iscipleship," they say,

> encompasses responsiveness. In their school encounters with the dynamics of life in God's creation, students are called to respond with wisdom and knowledge, with discernment and creativity, with playfulness and perseverance, and above all, with love and compassion. We want such student response to be freely given and authentic, but, at the same time, we wish the response to reflect the fruit of the Spirit (34).

Clearly, responsiveness is a larger, more inclusive term than responsibility. The student response, if it is to be what the authors envision, will always be a responsible response.

The third discussion question posed at the conclusion of the first chapter raises an important issue: Does all this talk about discipleship and gifts and community not de-emphasize academic rigor or the striving for excellence in learning (38)? Behind this question lurks a long tradition of an unhealthy dichotomy between "cognitive" and "affective" domains and between academic and social goals. In this review I have no space to discuss this tradition at length. Suffice it to say that although cognitive goals and social skills can be formally distinguished, in actuality the two are so closely interwoven as to be virtually inseparable. Cognition is integrally intertwined with social, emotional, and faith dimensions, in short, with the entire person. The rationalistic tendency to emphasize—and

thereby often separate—academic excellence while relegating other aspects (such as the aesthetic or physical) to an extracurricular status does violence to the student as image of God. Schools are to teach persons, not merely abstracted minds.

Chapter 2 is possibly the best in the book, describing what Christian educators are up against. Titled "Challenges to the Vision: Cultural Constraints in the Nineties," the chapter details not only the spiritual forces hampering our Christian educational efforts, but also displays, in unambiguous language, the reality of today's schooling practice. It makes explicit the unspoken regimentation which controls so many of our schools.

Particularly important, it concludes that Christian schools differ very little from public schools. The story of Glennis and Nate (42-44), two students moving through a typical K-12 school system, can apply equally to Christian or to public schools. Both Christian and public schools represent "a highly refined model resembling factory production (45). Our authors conclude:

> Building design, teachers as technicians, scheduling, prepackaged curriculum, the ringing of bells, assignments, grouping of students, accumulation of credits, testing/ grading/ranking of students—all such practices assume that a product is being manufactured in some way. Mass production assumes similarity of treatment and conformity of outcome; it hardly provides the best model for the unwrapping of gifts, the sharing of burdens, and the seeking of shalom"(45).

This insightful chapter, then, alerts the reader to a range of serious problems besetting the Christian school: questionable models of schooling, the power of a self-seeking individualism and competition, social disintegration, economic overconsumption, and environmental degradation. This excellent chapter alone is worth the cost of the entire book.

Part II: *Realizing the vision*. This part comprises the bulk of the book. The following topics are treated, in order of appearance: how to articulate a mission statement, how to set the stage for a new school year, how to forge a community of learning, and how we are to understand learning, the nature of knowledge, curriculum, teaching, and evaluation. I list these topics as "how to's," to emphasize the practical character of this part of the book.

For Christian schools seriously considering change and improvement, chapters 3 and 4 (the first two chapters of Part II) are probably the most useful and easiest to work with. Chapter 3 outlines a step-by-step procedure for constructing a mission statement. Surely the importance of a mission statement is obvious. Without one, how will the teachers know what to teach, how to teach, and how to evaluate? A school without a clear sense of purpose will either drift along on fashionable educational currents or remain stuck in an unexamined traditionalism. Mission statements, then, are indispensable. Chapter 3 explains how to get one, and how to make it function.

The next two chapters (4 and 5) belong together. They describe the nature of community and how to achieve it in a school. Chapter 4 focuses on teambuilding while Chapter 5 develops the concept of a "covenant learning community." "Schools," the authors propose, "should develop mutual interdependence among parents, teachers, and students. Each member should respond to others on the basis of common commitment, values, and purpose"(110). To construct such a mutually interdependent covenant community requires a shared vision, mutual love and compassion, and servant leadership (114-115). The use of the term "covenant" is important. It distinguishes the vision of our authors from secular versions of cooperation and classroom collaboration.

Relationships within such a school community, the authors explain, are of four types: teacher-teacher, teacher-student, principal-teacher, and school-parents. The second of these four relationships merits comment, for it is here that diverging philosophical perspectives emerge most forcefully. Our authors propose—rightly, in my view—that teachers recognize the office and authority of the students (122). Consequently, teachers ought to encourage their students to exercise responsibly their authority over their own learning. This call, I would argue, is not a call to return to the open classroom or to a Deweyan democratism. On the contrary, if we accept the task of the Christian school as the development of responsive discipleship, then teachers cannot lord it over students by maintaining complete power over their entire learning process. Rather, as they guide students along, teachers must provide them with opportunities to make decisions regarding the learning process. This is especially necessary at the high school level, where teaching can easily become limited to "covering the content and maintaining control for the duration of the class" (121).

These chapters on community offer some important insights. They point out, for example, that many schools the develop community via extracurricular activities, while in the (academic) curriculum individualism and competition (along with grading on the curve) are the rule. Cooperation and teamwork are often touted as reasons why athletics and sports are so important, while in the regular classroom such

cooperation and teamwork are often overlooked or neglected. Useful, too, is the discussion of the factors that prevent teachers from forming a genuine team, and the reasons why it is so difficult for faculty members to agree on important school issues (111-113).

Chapters 6 and 7 lead us into more theoretic and complicated topics. They seek to answer two important questions: How do we learn, and how do we know? They take us, in other words, on an excursion into learning theory and epistemology. To my mind, these two chapters are the least successful in the book. Several problems emerge. First, the two chapters overlap considerably. For example, in the chapter on learning we find an extensive discussion of "ways of knowing" (135-137), while in the chapter on knowing we encounter a lengthy explanation of the "rhythms of learning" (172-175). Secondly, the issue of learning styles requires a treatment much more explicit and sustained than what the authors offer. How are we to think of the various learning style theories currently in vogue? Should we accept a specific model? How do we identify learning styles? Should teachers teach to learning styles or encourage students to "flex" their styles? Questions like these, currently receiving much attention in the educational world, are not adequately addressed in these chapters.

Thirdly, the authors propose a learning theory which needs further clarification. Chapter 7 describes "growth in knowledge (learning) as a three-fold rhythm. The first 'beat' in this rhythm is immersion in experience; the second is by withdrawal from experience, a distanced focusing on it; the third is by returning to experience in a purposeful response"(172). This formulation raises significant questions about the nature of "experience." Chapter 7 seems to suggest a dichotomy between "experience" and something else. But is not the totality of our life experiential? Can we "withdraw from experience"? What are we experiencing when we "withdraw from experience"? We must also ask whether the proposed "rhythm" explains all of school learning or only some parts of it. It is hard to see, for example, how such a rhythm describes what actually happens in the first year of elementary school. The theory offered, in short, seems too general and too simple to account for the complexity of learning.

These criticisms, however, do not abrogate a number of valuable insights in these chapters. The authors rightly reject, for example, the traditional belief that students learn best by listening to the teacher and memorizing notes. Enough has been discovered about learning for us to know that if genuine learning is to take place, the students must learn actively and facts must be taught in a context.

These chapters, furthermore, call us back to a biblical understanding of knowledge. "To truly know is to listen to God's revelation and to respond aright, to hear, and to do"(161). True knowledge can therefore never be equated with the ability to recite masses of abstract, unrelated facts. Such positivism should have no place in our Christian schools. Yet much of standardized testing and our evaluation procedures require little more than a fragmented grasp of unrelated "basics." No wonder that so many students find school learning disconnected from "the real world."

The very end of Chapter 7 introduces the next chapter, which deals with curriculum. Our authors propose that a Christian school curriculum should be "integral" (180-181). Why use the word "integral" and not the more conventional term "integrated"? Because "integrated" suggests "separate pieces to be integrated," as if through our curriculum we can construct coherence and integrality. Not so, our authors correctly remind us. A curriculum should reflect an already coherent creation.

Now we can quibble about terms. The point, however, is extremely significant. The fact is that our schools, especially at secondary levels, splinter an integrated world into unrelated disciplines and subjects. Much of Christian secondary and college education is a hop-skippity-jump process. Students move from one classroom to another and from one subject to another, often without seeing any connections. While there is, as our authors affirm (235), a place for the focused study of separate disciplines and skills, our curricula do very little to help students see contexts, relationships, connectedness, and integrality.

The theme of the "integral unit" is picked up and elaborated in the next three chapters. These discuss views of curriculum, deciding what to teach, and deciding how to teach. These three chapters, then, constitute one basic unit, for they refer to three inseparable aspects of curriculum. Curriculum, after all, is not simply the sequence of content to be taught in a school, nor a guide that tells teachers what their students should have learned by the end of the year. Rather, we are to understand curriculum as the "dynamic plan for teaching and learning" within the "context of an organically developing relationship between teacher and learners . . . . While we can certainly distinguish between programs and instruction . . . in the heads and in the actions of the teacher, what is taught and

how it is taught are two sides of the one coin" (189). This way of thinking about curriculum helps us to avoid the traditional polarity between a subject-oriented curriculum and a progressivist child-centered curriculum.

How do we go about planning a curriculum? The authors suggest a cycle with three points of reference: play, problem-solving, and purposeful responding. Space does not permit me to evaluate this promising proposal in detail, so I limit myself to some general comments. First, the idea of play suggests that a Christian school curriculum should reflect joy and celebration, a "wonder and amazement at being alive in a rich and vibrant world"(200). The call for play, moreover, counteracts a common problem in our school curriculum: the assumption that teachers need only to transmit sterilized, logical structures of knowledge to students. But in so doing they prevent students from experiencing the rich multiformity and mystery of God's creation.

The suggestion that a curriculum should have a "problem-solving" character follows from the earlier proposal to see learning as immersion and withdrawal. Do not confuse this notion of problem-solving with the progressivist tradition. The authors want us to understand problem-solving in a wide sense: "Through our playing around in God's world, our knowledge is *broadened* and enriched. But in the problems posed *to* creation by us and *by* us to creation [do the authors mean "to us by creation"?], our knowledge is *deepened*" (207).

Finally, our curriculum, so say our authors, should promote purposeful responding. This would seem only natural. Why would we ask our students to learn subject matter and to solve problems if not to enable them to respond as Christ's disciples? In some ways, then, the theme of purposeful response sums up the entire argument for Christian education the authors make in this book.

Chapters 9 and 10 of Part II consider the instructional side of curriculum: How do we decide what and how to teach? Not unexpectedly, these chapters elaborate the concept of the integral curriculum, and suggest ways to construct and implement it. I think these chapters still focus too much on curricular lesson planning and do not sufficiently address teaching strategies. The distinctions the authors draw between direct teaching, such as by lectures, and group discussion are too facile and too glib, it seems to me. The connections and interactions between direct, indirect, and participatory teaching strategies, and the assumptions underlying these approaches, need much more attention. I also fear that the heavy emphasis on the integral unit may disappoint and discourage especially the high school teachers, most of whom were required to major in a specific discipline in order to be licensed to teach.

But again, in spite of shortcomings, chapter 9 presents some excellent insights. The discussion of how textbooks both control and distort teaching Christianly (216 ff.) merits close study. Thought-provoking is the critique that Christian schools tend to serve a narrow segment of white, middle class society, and thus ignore the call to be a light in a dark world. Christian schools should invite children from a wide range of economic and ethnic diversity, so that these children, too, may benefit from a Christian education.

The final chapter of Part II explores the issue of evaluation, a thorny problem that just won't go away. The chapter reminds us clearly of the purpose of evaluation, though their suggestions are neither new nor surprising. I recommend that this chapter be studied together with what I consider to be the best discussion of evaluation to date, namely, chapter 8 in Harro Van Brummelen's book *Walking With God in the Classroom*.

The final part of the book, consisting of chapters 12 and 13, continues the description of "realizing the vision." It summarizes the entire book and lays out a program for change (304-308). The recommendations make sense. Yet, one of the overriding concerns with which I began this review returns to haunt me. Will the recommendations, sensible and biblical though they are, be acceptable to and adopted by our Christian schools? A larger question lurks beneath the surface: How does change occur? *A Vision With a Task* does not explicitly address this question. As a result, I fear that this excellent book may end up where too many other insightful proposals have landed: on dusty book shelves in principals' offices and faculty lounges. As I have suggested elsewhere ("Can Christian Schools Change?" *Christian Educators Journal*, February 1994, pp. 4-5), change in our Christian schools occurs not as a result of purposeful programs inspired by books such as this one, but willy-nilly as a consequence of changes in the larger secular educational environment.

I also fear that the perspective of *A Vision With a Task* is susceptible to easy dismissal by being labeled a Christian compromise with progressivism and social reconstructionism. Such a critique, I believe, reflects three problems: a lack of understanding of what progressivism and social reconstructionism are really all about, unwillingness to recognize positive insights discovered by non-Christians, and a failure to reflect

critically on the models of Christian education we currently support and perpetuate.

To mitigate this admittedly negative conclusion, let me say that *A Vision With a Task* offers new hope for truly distinctive Christian education. If distinctiveness is of concern to us—and it should be in view of the enormous financial sacrifices our schools require—we should study and discuss this book in detail. It will help us regain and restate a sorely needed educational vision in a darkening world. *A Vision With a Task* represents, I believe, one of the most significant attempts to date, both to articulate the biblical direction in which Christian schools should be moving and to suggest concrete, practical steps to do so. It is a book Christian educators cannot afford to ignore.

The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology, by Richard Lints (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). 336 pages. $19.99, paperback. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology.

Christian publishing, like fashion, has its trends. Books on the New Age Movement are out. Let's all hope that praying-for-weight-loss books have passed their apogee. Books about evangelicalism, however, are definitely hot, particularly books on what's wrong with evangelicalism. Postmodernism is in too. I didn't say *good*, but *in*. Whether it's a good thing depends upon whose book you read, but it's almost a requirement right now for any author to take stock of postmodern culture's tendency to affirm confessional pluralism and the relativity of all worldviews and knowledge. If the writer can work in his or her diagnosis of the cultural and moral malaise of evangelicalism, so much the better.

Lints has done that, and done it better than most. His analysis of postmodernism is genuinely instructive. His examination of evangelicalism is insightful and, I think, sadly dead-on. But neither of these are the center of the book. They are occasional and contextual to Lints' purpose. He wants to do something that he confesses is not a popular or burning concern within evangelicalism. He wants to reconstruct the capacity for thinking Christianly within the body of Christ. In order to think with the mind of Christ, the church needs to learn how to think about and reflect upon biblical revelation (6). It is only when the church has regained its biblical moorings and immerses itself in the biblical story that it will be able "to bring the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life" (182).

While Lints describes his task as prolegomenal, and in reading it I came to think of the book as an introduction to theological hermeneutics, the issue throughout is Scripture. Not the Bible as a thing out there somewhere, but as the written Word of God living within the lives of the people of God. In appeal and challenge more than in complaint, Lints claims:

> It is a fundamental challenge facing contemporary theology to educate a church that is largely ignorant of the Scriptures and therefore largely ignorant of the controlling biblical images and metaphors that have informed theology in ages past. The translation of the redemptive historical message of the Scriptures into the vernacular of modern culture will be meaningless unless and until the church itself is educated in the vernacular of the Scriptures. We have to go back before we can go forward. (112-13)

The Christian task is to bring human life and endeavor under the judgmental and transformative light of the Word of God. But this task is exceedingly difficult. First, it is difficult because evangelicals, for all their celebrated loyalty to Scripture, are in the end more loyal to a view of the Bible than they are to immersing themselves in and living out the story that the Bible conveys. Reducing the Bible to a collection of lectures on a few fundamental dogmas and a catalog of practical, easy to follow, moral examples, evangelicalism has effectively removed itself from the Bible's critical analysis of our lives and our world.

Second, the task of bringing Scripture to bear upon our lives is difficult because reading the Bible is not easy (69). There. Someone finally said it. Reading the Bible, really reading the Bible is hard work. Reading the Bible well is every bit as difficult as hitting a fastball and decidedly more difficult than rough carpentry. It takes time, commitment, self-awareness, and an awareness of the nature and purpose of the text before us. Evangelical commitments to the complete perspicuity of Scripture and the democracy of interpretation are just plain wrong—and the prevalence of those commitments demand that evangelicals relearn how to read. Add a magical view of the work of the Holy Spirit to evangelical individualism and perspicuity, and its little wonder that American Protestantism has produced the number of sects and cults that it has.

One of the ironies of the evangelical tradition (and there are many) is its often-voiced commitment to absolutes. Generalizations are always dicey, but Lints contends that evangelicals have tended to elevate and